

1848

## HINDSIGHT

## A Voyage for the Valentine

By Jody Morgan

What does the voyage of the Mayflower have to do with the celebration of St. Valentine's Day? Certainly, the members of the Pilgrim congregation aboard the vessel had no intention of bringing the customs associated with that pagan festival to the New World. Indeed, the Puritan influence in England in the 17th century almost succeeded in abolishing the pairing practices associated with Valentine's Day as Shakespeare knew it. Yet the journey of the Pilgrims proved in the long run to be a significant voyage for the valentine.

The history of St. Valentine's Day involves the tenuous association of the death of a Christian martyr with the celebration of a Roman holiday too popular for the early church to eradicate. While the versions of Valentine's life vary greatly, there is general agreement that the man was executed about 270 A.D. on Feb. 14, the eve of Lupercalia. On this night, eligible Roman youths would draw the names of the maidens who would be their partners for the festival. When the Romans invaded Britain, the custom of drawing names came with them. Lupercalia, loosely veiled with an acceptable Christian title, persisted through the ages as a remembrance of St. Valentine.

By the time the Pilgrims were afloat, the pairing of people as "valentines" had become a costly custom for the wealthy. A gentleman was obliged to present the woman who was chosen for his valentine with gifts commensurate with his means. Sometimes the woman was expected to produce presents, too. The pairing lasted for an entire year. A married man might be obliged to honor a single lady with his attentions; a married woman might find herself paired with a friend's husband.

Gloves, associated with the concept of giving one's hand in marriage, were a favorite valentine token for the moderately affluent, but among the nobility, jewels were considered the appropriate selection. In "The Valentine and Its Origins," Frank Staff cites from the personal expense book of Princess Mary Tudor (known in later years as "Bloody Mary") an entry for February 1537-'38: "Item, Given to George Mountjoy drawing my Lady's grace his

Valentine." Although Staff does not include the description of this particular present, Mary gave to another "valentine," Antony Brown, a "broach of gold enameled black with an Agate of the story of Abraham with iii small rocket rubies."

Curiously, although the Puritans were noted for their denunciation of the holiday, a letter written by John Winthrop, later to be governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, has been preserved as an early example of a written valentine. The missive, dated Feb. 14, 1629, and addressed to his wife just prior to his departure for the New World, closes: "Thou must be my valentine for none hath challenged me."

Not surprisingly, lavishly decorated, handmade valentines from the 18th century were kept secured among family treasures. Examples now appearing in private and public collections indicate that the holiday was honored throughout the American colonies as well as in England.

During the 19th century, as postal rates in both England and America dropped to a level that encouraged mass usage, the greeting card industry began to flourish on both sides of the Atlantic. In Worcester, Southworth A. Howland, a direct descendant of Pilgrim John Howland, ran the largest book and stationery store.

John Howland, you may recall, owed his arrival in the New World to a stroke of fortune or, perhaps, a minor miracle, depending upon your personal view. As William Bradford relates: "In sundry of these storms the winds were so fierce and the seas so high, as they could not bear a knot of sail, but were forced to hull for divers days together. And in one of them, ... a lusty young man called John Howland, coming upon some occasion above the gratings was ... thrown into the sea; but it pleased God that he caught hold of the top-

sail halyards which hung overboard and ran out at length. Yet he held his hold (though he was several fathoms under water) till he was hauled up by the same rope to the brim of the water..."

In 1847, when higher education for women was a completely new concept in Massachusetts, Southworth Howland's daughter, Esther, graduated from Mount



Above and below left: Homemade valentines, c. 1900, from the archives of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society.

Holyoke Seminary. She was planning to be a teacher, but a quirk of fate (or a dart from Cupid's quiver) altered the course of her life. Seeing a few expensive imported valentines, which her father had bought for his 1848 stock, Esther remarked that she could surely make prettier ones than those.

Piecing her valentines together using colored lithographs pasted to sheets of writing paper, which she scalloped by hand, and enlisting one of her brothers to inscribe appropriate verses on each, Esther Howland produced two or three dozen samples, which another brother took to New York. Imagine her surprise when he returned with orders for several thousand dollars worth of her creations!

Combining ingenuity with charity, Esther employed four young girls whose families had lately been impoverished, and gradually built a business that monopolized the American market. Esther's valentines retailed on both coasts, and her annual business totaled as much as \$75,000 in hand-crafted greeting cards.

Inexpensive, mass-produced valentines took over the industry by the turn of the century. A 1910 valentine ad for A.S. Burbank on Court Street in Plymouth offers cards "to convey your message of love. You will find them in varying degrees of sweetness. At all prices too, from the dainty little lace affairs at one cent, three cents and five cents up to the lovely creations valued by quarters and halves and dollars."

But some of us still favor the hand-cut, homemade, one-of-a-kind valentine. And, not to offend the feelings of those who do not believe in saints, do remember to include Lupercalia on your calendar.

